New L.A. Police Chief Probes Organized Crime Unit for Spying

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7/11/92

LOS ANGELES, July 10—Los Angeles Police Chief Willie L. Williams, capping his first full week on the job, said today he had launched an investigation into charges that the department's special organized crime squad spied on local officials, politicians and celebrities.

The allegations are another blemish to the image of the 8,100-member Los Angeles Police Department, already rocked by the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney G. King and criticism over its response to the riots that followed the virtual exoneration of the four white officers accused in that case.

Williams ordered the Organized Crime Investigative Division closed while the probe is underway, its offices padlocked and uniformed guards posted around the clock to ensure that the unit's files remain secure.

The files contain information about a variety of influential Angelenos that had been gathered by electronic listening devices, searches of their trash and seizures of confidential telephone, bank and credit records, according to a new book by a former officer in the unit and a former newspaper reporter.

Williams stopped short, however, of forswearing undercover operations in the future. "It is absolutely necessary in law enforcement to gather information in various ways," he said.

Despite its name, the division did little to combat organized crime and reported directly to former police chief Daryl F. Gates, according to the book, "L.A. Secret Police: Inside the LAPD Elite Spy Network." The book's charges were reported in Friday's Los Angeles Times.

The book's authors are Mike Rothmiller, a 10-year police department veteran, and former newspaper reporter Ivan G. Goldman. Rothmiller served in the unit for five years. During that time, detectives spent much of their time trying to determine whether then-California Gov. Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown Jr. and then-California Attorney General John Van de Kamp were gay, the authors report.

Other targets of investigations, the authors allege, include Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, a longtime Gates foe and former Los Angeles police lieutenant; Los Angeles City Council members; actor Robert Redford; baseball's Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda and CBS News correspondent Connie Chung, a former local news anchor.

Gates, who retired last month after 14 years a chief, denied the book's allegations and described Rothmiller as a disgruntled officer who was dismissed for fabricating an apparent assault against him, Reuter news service reported.

Over the past half-century, civil liberties groups have periodically accused the Los Angeles police of improperly investigating groups and individuals. Legendary police chief William Parker established a "red squad" in the anti-communist scare eras of the 1940s and 1950s. In 1983, the Los Angeles Police Commission abolished the department's Public Disorder Intelligence Division, which civil liberties groups had accused of improper activities for more than a decade.

The book at the center of the current controversy was to go on sale next Thursday but is being rushed to Los Angeles bookstores Saturday, said the publisher, Pocket Books.

Coauthor Rothmiller left the police department after he said he was injured in the line of duty in 1982. He became involved in a dispute with the department over his disability benefits and police officials maintained he faked the incident. In 1984, a judge ruled that his superiors in the organized crime unit had harassed him. He now works as an independent television producer.